

When You're Evaluating Your Company's Needs

No matter how remote it is, a remote office should always be treated like it's inside the company headquarters. See more laptop pictures.

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When you walk into a typical business, you're probably not setting foot in the company's main office. Instead, you're in a branch. Thanks to everything from globalization to mergers, more businesses are opening more offices -- and more employees are working somewhere other than company headquarters. In fact, more than 75 percent of workers report to their jobs at a branch location [source: Yankee Group]. On top of that, about 90 percent of new hires will be employed at a branch office [source: Cisco].

Although branches are often called "remote" offices, they shouldn't feel remote. Instead, each branch should operate as if it were inside the company's headquarters. Communication with employees should happen seamlessly. Clients and the public should get corporate information reliably and accurately, no matter which office it comes from. Across all of its offices, a company's brand identity and culture should be consistent. They influence how employees work together, as well as the experience they provide to the company's customers, says Paul Parkin, founding partner of SALT Branding. In addition to having a hard time with communication and culture, companies with ineffective or poorly maintained information technology (IT) integration can face lots of technical problems. If different offices use different software and hardware, or if they update these tools erratically, they can have a number of problems, including the following:

High costs due to everything from extra maintenance to lost productivity

Incompatible computer systems

Slow reporting of technical issues

Network performance problems

If it doesn't integrate its technology well, a company can also have trouble recovering from system failures and computer problems at its branch offices. Many branch offices don't have their own tech support staff, which can compound all of these issues.

Fortunately, there are lots of tools to help businesses integrate their remote offices with one other and with headquarters, no matter how large these businesses are or how many offices they have. Read on to learn how your company can successfully integrate its remote offices. These needs make a big difference in exactly what it takes to integrate remote offices. But there are a few universal steps that any business can follow during the process:

Evaluating needs

Seeking assistance from IT experts

Updating and enhancing technology based on expert recommendations

Ensuring secure, centralized data storage

When you're evaluating your company's needs, first ask for feedback from your staff on problems they've encountered. This will help you identify trouble spots. Once you have a general idea of where you need improvement, ask for technical help from an IT consulting firm or your company's IT team. These experts will help you determine your company's strengths and weaknesses and develop an integration plan. Upgrading and optimizing your network will be a big part of this step. You might also consider adding newer technologies like VoIP (voice over internet protocol) and desktop video conferencing to bring your offices closer together.

VoIP technology can allow calls to be delivered and received anywhere within the company. For example, a receptionist at one branch can receive a call and transfer it to another -- or to an employee who is telecommuting from a home office. The caller won't ever know he's being transferred from location to location.

Desktop video conferencing is growing in popularity as a way for employees to efficiently communicate across time zones -- and even across the hall. Employees can see and hear each other during a video conference, which can make it a more effective way to communicate than e-mail or text chat. Video conferencing also fosters a sense of community among employees who, although they work for the same company, may never meet face to face. "People gravitate toward video," says Steve Westmoreland, CIO of Avistar, a desktop video conferencing provider. "They gravitate toward the visual image very readily because it most closely approximates regular human interaction."

The last step to integrating a remote office is to secure all the data, which we'll look at on the next page.

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Perhaps the biggest mistake a company can make when setting up branch offices is allowing its data to be scattered among the offices, rather than centralized in one location where it can be shared, secured and reliably backed up, says Joe Rejeski, founder of Avenue X Group, an IT support and consulting firm. In a worst-case scenario, scattered data can make it hard for a business to rebuild its network after a major technical failure. But not having a central data server can also lead to day-to-day problems within a business. For example, employees may be communicating with customers using old or incorrect documents, with the correct versions stored on someone else's desktop.

Rather than keeping sensitive data on employees' computers or on servers at each office, a

more integrated solution is to collect it all and store it on one server or collection of servers in a central location. The servers don't have to be in the same building as the main office -- they may be in another facility. The important part is that IT staff only need to secure, maintain and back up data in one location. Elsewhere, employees can access their data through terminal server, which allows users to log in remotely. Another important tool is a virtual private network (VPN), which lets employees access and retrieve data from outside the office while still keeping the communication between their computers and the central server secure.

These tools do more than just offer flexibility and remote access to important data. They can also help prevent employees from accidentally duplicating or losing important files. If everything's stored on one central server, IT staff can perform regular backups in case of problems. And since everyone's on the same system, everything from training to system upgrades can be easier and more efficient.

Read on to the next page for more on integrating remote offices.

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